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A MOTHER IN ISRAEL.

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SERMON

PREACHED AT THE FUNERAL

OF

Mrs. Sarah Matthews,

SEARSPORT, APRIL 15, 1851.

BY STEPHEN THURSTON,

Pastor of the Congregational Church, Searsport.

BOSTON:

PRESS OF GEORGE B. WATSON.

No. 25 Doane Street.

1853.

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The author, after long resistance, has at length yielded to the importunity of the friends of the deceased; and, for their gratification, and to preserve among surviving friends a memorial of departed worth, has reluctantly consented to the publication of the following hasty production.

SERMON.

Judges v: 7.

The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel.

These words are extracted from the song of Deborah and Barak, celebrating the conquest of Israel over their enemies. Israel had been delivered into the hand of Jabin, king of Canaan. Twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel. The highways were unoccupied, and travellers walked through by ways. The villages were forsaken, and the people for security dwelt in the walled towns.

Deborah, a prophetess, arose to be judge in Israel. She summoned the people to combat. They threw off the yoke of oppression, and obtained a signal victory over their enemies. The song of Deborah was to celebrate this victory. She was the supreme ruler in Israel, and acted as a mother to Israel. She encouraged the heart and strengthened the hand of the oppressed and dispirited people. She accompanied Barak, the captain of the host, to the war, and undoubtedly by her presence and counsel, animated the army in the fearful conflict.

Deborah employed her authority for the good of the people, with that disinterested assiduity which a mother shows to her beloved offspring. She was indeed a mother to Israel; especially in supporting true religion, with which both their temporal prosperity and eternal salvation were inseparably connected. She was an eminently good and useful woman, watching with maternal solicitude for the prosperity of true religion, and the good of that nation, which included the Church of God on earth.

The language by which Deborah characterises herself, as a MOTHER IN ISRAEL, has long been applied—and with entire propriety—to eminently pious and useful women; to those who have felt a mother's solicitude for the church; and have prayed and toiled for its prosperity.

The importance of such women to the church, is the theme on which I propose to dwell for a few moments.

I. They often form the nucleus of a christian church.

Plant a few such women with their families in the wilderness, or amidst the moral wastes of God's kingdom, and in process of time they will gather around them a sufficient amount of religious influence to constitute a church of Christ. Their children are taught to fear the Lord, to reverence the Sabbath, to respect the institutions of religion, to venerate the ministers of Christ. Their neighbors are constrained to respect their religion for its consistency and moral elevation. Their houses are the home of the missionary, and often the temples where he preaches the everlasting gospel to the scattered inhabitants. Thus a widening influence is exerted, till a church of Christ arises to cultivate the moral wastes, and turn them into fruitful fields.

It is no uncommon thing to have a church arise under such circumstances. Some solitary mother in Israel has been the grand nucleus. She has been the centre of religious influence. Her prayers and solicitations have been the means of turning the feet of some missionary of the cross to her home in the wilderness, whose labors God has blessed to the revival of his work, and the building of his kingdom. In many of the missionary fields of this state, the great source of earthly encouragement is the few pious females there found, who labor and wait for the consolation of Israel. They are the religious strength of the places where they dwell. They are the hope of Zion. And when the history of many a flourishing church shall be told, it will be found that it had its origin in the prayers and faith and pious zeal of some mother in Israel, who may have been little known on earth, but whose record is on high.

II. Such women often constitute no small share of the spiritual life and energy of a church.

The brethren are more exposed to the chilling influences of earth; are more engrossed in the business of the world; more involved in its perplexities and anxieties. It is therefore more difficult for them to keep alive upon the altar of their hearts the fire of devotion. They often yield, to a criminal extent, to these adverse influences, and become languid in affection and feeble in effort.

While the brethren are necessarily thus exposed, pious females are more retired. They have better opportunity to commune with their own hearts, with their bibles, and their God. Consequently they are more prayerful, more spiritually minded, more careful for Zion, more devoted to her best interests. In fact they often constitute most of the vital strength of the church. Extensively they give tone to its movements, are the life of the Sabbath School, are the most efficient agents in the benevolent enterprises of the church.

Their prayers are an unspeakable blessing. The value of prayer is poorly understood; the blessings it brings and the good it accomplishes are either unperceived or undervalued. It is vital to the prosperity of religion and the success of the gospel. It lays hold of Omnipotence. It brings down an Almighty arm for the protection and enlargement of the church. It brings the Spirit's influence and energy to attend the word of truth, and make it quick and powerful. There are no prayers more prevailing than those offered by mothers in Israel. They watch for Zion with maternal solicitude. They lay her wants at the Saviour's feet; they spread them before the throne of grace, and plead with an earnestness which can take no denial.

Let a church be blessed with truly pious, praying women, and there will be little reason to despair of it, although clouds may lower, and storms beat upon it. When all else is dark and unpromising, these mothers in Israel will be found hard by the throne; and, with an unfaltering faith, holding fast by the promises of God. They are the last to despond. They are sweetly assured that the church is safe; that God will yet revive his work, and build his kingdom. According to their faith it is done unto them. While such women live the church does not die.

III. Mothers in Israel train up their families for the church.

There is not a more important service rendered the church by pious women, than giving to it well-trained families, consecrated by the grace of God and a mother's prayers, to the noble enterprise of multiplying its conquests and extending its bounds in the earth. The direct influence of such mothers is precious and salutary. It gives vital energy to the church. But the *indirect* influence which they exert through the sons and daughters, whom they sometimes send forth to bless Zion, is many times more extensive. What does not the church owe to those christian mothers who have given her the Augustines, the Luthers, the Wesleys, the Whitefields, the Edwardses, the Brainards of other centuries; and the Dwights, the Beechers, the Halls, the Chalmers of the present? How vast the service which such men have rendered the church! How wide and happy their influence upon the destinies of the world! Mothers in Israel have given their sons to the church. Their instructions, and prayers, and maternal influence, have, under God, moulded them for this high service, and consecrated them to it.

But they have given to the church not only her champions, but, extensively, her ordinary ministers and members. Many a pious Hannah has brought her young Samuel to the altar, and lent him to the Lord as long as he shall live. A large part of christian ministers are the sons of pious mothers. So are the members. That mother who trains up three, five, or ten sons and daughters to serve God in the church,—to fill various stations of usefulness in his kingdom,—is a benefactress, to be had in grateful remembrance. Her name will be fragrant on earth and fragrant in heaven. The church needs many more such mothers, whose grand aim and effort it shall be to train her children for the service of God.

IV. Mothers in Israel are the stay and comfort of the ministers of Christ.

If there be any work in which frail man engages, in which aid, and sympathy, and comfort are needed, it is the work of the ministry. Its responsibilities, and toils, and trials are peculiar and exhausting. The obstacles to suc-

cess are mighty. Satan and his hosts; wicked men, and evil passions, and heresy, and wild delusion, in nameless forms, obstruct the minister's progress. He must encounter the opposition of unreasonable and wicked men; the envy, the coldness, and neglect of those of whom he has a right to expect better things. The consequences of his ministry take hold on eternity. The influence of his labors will be felt in weal or woe forever. When he beholds the thoughtlessness and hardness of impenitent mortals, the stupidity and worldliness of professed disciples, a slumbering church, and thronging multitudes sweeping on to perdition, he goes bowed down from day to day with a burdened heart.

Amidst these trials of his holy calling, he scarcely finds a higher earthly support than the godly women of his flock. I can here speak from happy experience. It has been my favored lot to be surrounded with a goodly company of such from the commencement of my ministry. They have been my most true and constant friends. They have given me the most cordial welcome to their homes and their tables. They have ministered to my necessities. They have sympathised with me in my trials. They have spoken words of counsel and consolation. They have strengthened and encouraged me by their prayers. The assurance that these mothers in Israel maintain daily and earnest intercourse with heaven—that they dwell near the throne—is full of encouragement to the minister of Jesus, that he shall not labor in vain nor spend his strength for nought.

Even Paul makes grateful mention of those who labored with him in the gospel; who refreshed his spirit and strengthened his hands. Of one he says, she hath been a succorer of many, and of myself also. Others he calls, my helpers in Christ Jesus. Of another he says, she bestowed much labor on us. Of others, they labored much in the Lord.

The minister of Christ, as he reads these inspired commendations of pious women in the primitive church, feels a deep sympathy with the apostle. He has so often experienced the hearty co-operation of these mothers in Israel, that he fully appreciates the feelings of Paul, and heartily responds to the commendations he bestows upon them.

But for them his hands would often hang down and his knees be feeble. The feeling of discouragement would more frequently bear him down, and paralyze his energies.

V. Godly women are some of the safest earthly depositaries of divine truth.

They have searched the scriptures; have drunk in knowledge from this sacred fountain. They have found the doctrines to tally with their own experience; to meet their own spiritual wants; have felt their power upon their hearts, transforming them into a resemblance of the heart of Jesus. The distinguishing doctrines of grace have thus been taught them of God, not only in the revealed word, but also by the work of the Spirit on their hearts. They are the light of their path, the food of their souls, the joy of their hearts. They are therefore received with unfaltering assurance. They are held with a firm grasp.

Having once intelligently embraced the doctrines of grace, there are no safer depositaries of them on earth than these mothers in Israel. They are not easily moved away from their steadfastness. Heresy may spread around them, but they hold fast to the pillars of truth. Infidelity may assault their faith, and vauntingly threaten to carry its very foundations, but they stand like pillars of granite amidst raging tempests and heaving billows. The subtle skeptic may urge objections to the gospel which they cannot answer; still their faith is unshaken. They know it is true, for they have felt its transforming and healing powers. You may as easily convince them that bread does not nourish them nor sleep refresh them.

It is seldom that an intelligent, pious woman, once well established in the doctrines of the cross, makes shipwreck of her faith. Popular preachers, and learned doctors, in their earnest studies and deep philosophies, sometimes get bewildered; while the mother in Israel holds fast the form of sound words. Ambition may prompt them to become the founders and leaders of heretical sects; while she continues the even tenor of her way in good old paths trodden by apostles and martyrs. The light which they shed is but the ignus-fatuus, which only dazzles and bewilders;

while her lamp of truth shines bright and steady, and the earnest inquirer may safely walk in its light.

Remarks.

1. No church blessed with a goodly number of devout, pious women, should ever despair.

It has been the lot of almost every church to experience seasons of darkness and trial. There are times when it seems as if the floods of error and irreligion would roll over her, and sweep away her landmarks, and blot out her name. Discouragement and despondency brood upon her members. The means of grace fail of their usual success. The multitude throng the way to death. The minister of Jesus is ready to exclaim, with a sorrowful heart, who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

But while a church includes within her bosom a goodly number of pious, godly women, she need not despond. Their prayers enter into the ears of the Infinite One. The light of their dwellings goes not out. Their labors cease not. Their holy example is a living witness to the truth. It preaches and reproves. And often, in answer to their prayers, and in pursuance of their efforts, the work of God is revived. The tide of desolation is rolled back. The captivity of Zion is turned. The way of the Lord is prepared, and he comes to his temple, and his kingdom, and makes all things new. Undoubtedly when the records of eternity shall be revealed, the prosperity of many churches, and the salvation of uncounted multitudes, will appear to have been more indebted to the prayers, and toils, and holy influence of godly women, than was ever known on earth.

2. The death of godly women is a loss to the church and a calamity to the world.

It is a loss to the church. Their prayers, and counsels, and pious influence are greatly needed. The church is too poor in moral excellence and too feeble in moral influence, to spare the purest, choicest, spirits in her enclosure. When God sees fit to remove them to their heavenly home, the church on earth is bereaved and afflicted. She may well

sit in sackcloth, and be humbled under God's chastening hand.

It is a loss to the world. It needs all the salt there is in it. Perishing sinners need the restraining influence of all the prayers and piety ever found in this sinful world. The death of every praying person is the removal of an influence which tends to hold back the transgressor from the path of ruin, and stay the sword of justice. Ten praying souls in Sodom would have saved the city. The removal of one such is a calamity to this pleasure-loving and sin-cursed world.

"Yea, though poor, and contemned, and ignorant of this world's wisdom,
Ill can his fellows spare him, though they know not of his value.
Thousands bewail a hero, and a nation mourneth for its king,
But the whole universe lamenteth the loss of a man of prayer."

In the death of our venerable friend whose remains lie before us, this church and community suffer a grievous bereavement. If there was any one who might, by way of eminence, be regarded as *the* mother of Israel in this place—the foster-mother of this church,—it was our deceased friend. In uttering this remark, I do but echo the sentiment of all who know her history.

Mrs. Sarah Matthews was born in Groton, Ms., in 1769. She was the daughter of Oliver and Sarah Parker. On her mother's side she was related to the family of Worcesters. Her mother was a sister of the mother of the late Dr. Samuel Worcester of Salem. While she was yet young, her parents removed to Castine, where her father was for many years one of the judges of the court of common pleas for the county of Hancock. Her mother was reputed as a woman of pleasing and able talents, and uncommon piety. The last years of her life were spent in this place. She was one of the original members of this church; and her name is yet fragrant and her memory blessed in this community.

Having become the wife of Mr. Samuel Matthews, and the mother of one child, Mrs. Matthews removed to this town in 1791—three score years ago, and settled upon the same farm on which she died, four miles back from the bay. This was then a wide and dense wilderness, with only here and there an opening and a family. They suf-

fered inconveniences and privations of which we have little knowledge and less realization.

Mrs. Matthews was not then pious. But notwithstanding she was far removed from the means of grace, save the possession of the bible, she was, in a few years, awakened by the spirit of God, to see and feel her lost and guilty state as a sinner. Her convictions were clear, and deep, and strong. She communicated her feelings to a neighbor, who was thereby awakened. A little meeting was established on the Sabbath, in which sermons were read, and one man was found to lead in prayer. The religious interest extended, and continued for one or two years. In 1797, several expressed hope in the mercy of God. Different denominations now began to come among them. One of their number, writing of those times more than forty years afterwards, said, "Our minds were uninstructed and unestablished. We were perplexed on every side, and knew not what to do. But in our distress we cried unto the Lord, and he heard us. We daily resorted to the bible for instruction, and in due time our minds became established in the Congregational system."

Mrs. Matthews was unquestionably the leading spirit of the little band of believers "in the woods," as the neighborhood was then, and long afterwards, called. January, 1802, she and several others united with the church in Belfast, then under the pastoral care of the Rev. Ebenezer Price;* of which they remained members until 1815, when the Congregational church in this place was organized, and composed a part of it.

Mrs. Matthews was blessed with a mind of unusual powers of discrimination, and soundness of judgment. She read the bible with care and study, and grasped, with a strong intellect and a firm faith, its great, distinctive, truths. She procured standard works in theology, such as Bellamy's, Boston's, &c., and thoroughly digested them. She knew *what* she believed and *why* she believed it; nor could she be removed away from her steadfastness. You might as well remove the mountain from its deep foundations. Of all the excellent and able women whom I have

*Mr. Price afterwards settled in Boscawen, N. H., where, after a long and useful ministry, he still enjoys a green old age. Some of the aged people of this region still remember him with respect and affection.

ever known, I regard her as having been the ablest theologian among them. Her views were clear, systematic and profound; and she was able to defend them almost with the ability of a theological professor. She was thoroughly Pedobaptist and Calvinistic in her faith. God's covenant with Abraham she regarded as the grand charter of all the spiritual blessings bestowed upon the race. The great Calvinistic doctrines of depravity, atonement, election, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, and the perseverance of the saints, she viewed as the central, vital truths of the gospel. They were not, to her, cold, dry, heartless speculations—but truths instinct with life, on which her soul fed and flourished. They were the stay and the consolation of her heart amidst the trials of her pilgrimage; her support and her joy as she passed over Jordan, and entered into the promised land.

But our venerable friend was not a mere theorist. She regarded the christian life as a sober, earnest reality. She was a living, practical christian. Her "conversation was in heaven." It is the delightful testimony of those who remember the early days of her christian course, when the population was sparse, and religious privileges were few, that when she and her christian neighbors met for social visits, their conversation was pre-eminently upon themes spiritual and divine. Picture to yourselves a company of christian mothers, such as resided in this neighborhood* from forty to fifty years ago, assembled, from time to time, in each others' houses, to spend a winter's evening. The friendly repast being ended, they gather around the large, open fire, glowing with many a burning log. Their children are in subjection with all gravity. As their hands ply the needle, listen to their animated converse. What are their leading themes? The newest fashions? the gay attire? the latest novel? or even their domestic cares? No. They talk of redemption by the cross; of the love of God; the compassion of Christ; the work of grace in their own hearts; their duties as christians in all the relations of life; the interests of Zion in their new settlement,† and

* This sermon was delivered in a private house, in the same neighborhood where the deceased lived and died.

† Known as *Mount Ephraim*, in the back part of Searsport.

how these interests can be best promoted. And as they talk, the animated countenance bespeaks the deep interest of their hearts in these holy topics. Picture such a scene, and you will see what was early and often witnessed in this neighborhood. The star of this goodly company was she whose pilgrimage has just closed. In matters of opinion; in views to be taken of christian doctrine and duty; in measures for the building up of Zion;—no voice was so influential as hers. That homage so often unconsciously paid to superior talent and moral worth, was unanimously accorded to her.

Our deceased friend was a woman of prayer. She lived near the throne, and often refreshed and strengthened her soul by communion with the Holy One. She wrestled hard for many years for the conversion of her husband; and in his old age he gave his heart to Christ, and went to his grave in peace.* She loved the house of God, and took much pains to enjoy the privileges of the sanctuary. She found strength and means to get to the house where God was worshipped on the Sabbath, although a portion of the time she had to ride from six to nine miles. Her example should mantle many a cheek of the present generation with a blush. As religious privileges have been multiplied, and brought nearer their door, they have grown remiss in their attendance upon them. She found her way occasionally to the house of God, a distance of four miles, after she was a widow of four score years. She so loved to commune with Christ at his table, and hold fellowship with his people around the sacramental board, that she surmounted all the difficulties in the way of being present.

Mrs. Matthews felt a lively interest in the spread of the gospel, and in all those great movements of the age to bring back this revolted and suffering world to its allegiance to God. Even in her old age she took great pleas-

* Mr. Matthews was a kind, friendly man; a firm friend and supporter of religious institutions; a constant attendant upon the means of grace. His house was always open to the ministers of Jesus, many of whom oft refreshed themselves there. But he did not yield a hearty subjection to the gospel till he was 68 years of age. Then the Holy Spirit so wrought upon him that he saw himself carnal, sold under sin. Confidence in his own goodness forsook him; and so anxious was he to know what he must do to be saved, that he repeatedly, at his advanced age, *walked* to the village, a distance of four miles, to an evening inquiry meeting, and home again. Such deep concern, such earnest inquiry, was not in vain; he soon found peace in believing. He confessed Christ before men, united with the church, and lived seven years to adorn his profession, and then died in peace. Let not the wives of impenitent husbands be soon discouraged. Several of the little praying band in "the woods," after long wrestling at the mercy-seat, had the happiness of seeing their aged husbands bow the knee to Jesus.

ure in *earning* something for the treasury of the Lord. I have often been the almoner of her bounties to give the bread of life to the perishing. She evidently took more real pleasure in giving for this purpose one dollar, which she had earned by knitting, than the mere worldling takes in the accumulation of hundreds.

Her love to the church was a marked feature in her character. She loved the church universal, but felt a peculiar interest in the church of which she was a member. She came into it on its formation. She watched over it with maternal love during its infancy and weakness, She was permitted to see it rise and extend till it had become two bands, and yet the original body to be reckoned among the strong churches of the state. In its prosperity she rejoiced. In its affliction she mourned. She was ever solicitous for the soundness of its faith, the purity of its character.

During her long and painful sickness, which she bore with exemplary patience and submission, her interested inquiries for the welfare of Zion, when called upon by her pastor and christian friends, strikingly illustrated her love for the church. It was strong in death. She would briefly answer questions respecting her own feelings and hopes. She had committed her soul to the keeping of the great shepherd, and was assured that all was safe. No clouds obscured her vision. No doubts rent her heart. But she would dwell here only for a moment; and then, amidst her terrible sufferings, she would inquire if there was any good word from the church. The least sign of good would light up her countenance with beams of joy. Thus she lived and thus she died. She was a mother in Israel, and as such she may be justly mourned. Her like we may not soon see again.

May the church feel the chastening hand of the Lord, and so improve the visitation that the divine favor may be still enjoyed.

Let the brother, who survives as the only representative of a once numerous family, remember that his own time draws near, and be also ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

May the children follow their venerated mother so far as she followed Christ; like her fill up their days in serving

God and his kingdom, and be prepared, when God shall call, to join their sainted parents in that world where sin and death never come. Few have had such a mother to lose. She was a marked women; one of rare intellectual and moral worth. But she was spared to a good old age; and she "comes to the grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season." To her death was gain. Your occasions of joy transcend those of sorrow. While you mourn your bereavement, you will rejoice in the rich grace of God which made her what she was, and which has brought her to the home of the blest. May her mantle fall upon you, and you all have grace to serve God faithfully here below, and finally to attain unto that rest which remains to the people of God.

REFLECTIONS

Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Sarah Matthews.

COMPOSED BY HARVEY CARPENTER.

Ah! what is earth and all its joys,
Compared with heavenly rest!
Its objects are but glittering toys,
And music,—harsh, discordant noise,
Unknown among the blest;
Here, life is short, and friendship frail,
And cruel passions flash and rail;
'Tis not our home; like travellers, we
Are hasting to Eternity.

On earth are pleasures, yes, 'tis true,
And for them most do strive;
But let them only these pursue,
And, in imaginations' view,
Enjoyment e'en derive;
Yet, that does but endure awhile,
E'er Satan's charms will sure beguile;
Then, disappointed, they begin
To see their folly, guilt and sin.
How oft, alas, their happiness
Is lost by anxious grief!
The mourning soul, perchance, may bless,
And cry to God in deep distress,
Or elsewhere seek relief;
Then, blessed is the one that can
Look from the helpless creature, man,
And find in God unbounded peace,
Whose love and aid will never cease.

'Tis He reveals that life alone,
Whose pleasures cheer the heart;
A peaceful, happy, glorious home,
Where Jesus bids his children come,
And from Him ne'er depart;
May we but fight the "fight of faith,"
As Paul, the great Apostle saith;
And when we die have joys above,
Unchanging as Jehovah's love.

For, death is not an endless sleep;
And e'en the lifeless dust
The living God in charge will keep,
Until it rise, though buried deep,
To life among the just;
The spirit then with glory crowned,
And 'mid the shining host around,
Its notes will raise, Salvation's song,
And through Eternity prolong!